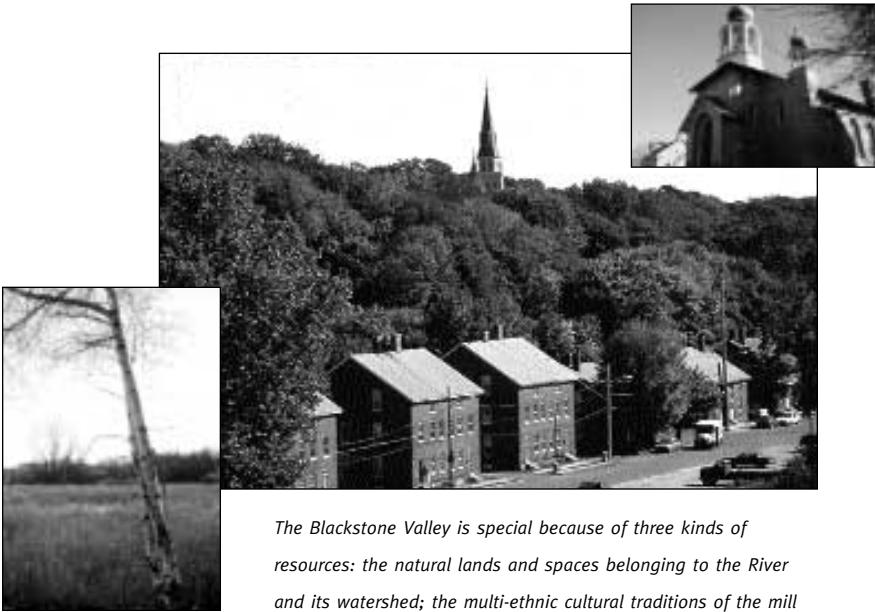


# Background

## OVERVIEW

### THE NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLACKSTONE VALLEY

The Valley of the Blackstone River, which drains south-central Massachusetts and northern Rhode Island, had long been recognized by historians as the birthplace of American Industry. In the 1790's, Samuel Slater, a textile maker in Pawtucket, RI, first succeeded in adapting English machine technology to cotton-yarn manufacturing powered by water wheels. What had hitherto been a small cottage industry of hand-made products soon became America's first factory-based industry of mass production. Gradually, this radical new "Rhode Island System of Manufacturing," which created whole new communities dedicated to a single manufactory (textiles in the Blackstone Valley), spread rapidly, leading by the mid 19th century to profound changes in the cultural, political, economic, demographic and physical characteristics of the new nation. Strangely, this nationally significant story — an essential element in what is unique about American history — has been largely restricted only to industrial historians and local residents who had grown up recognizing their Valley as a special place.



*The Blackstone Valley is special because of three kinds of resources: the natural lands and spaces belonging to the River and its watershed; the multi-ethnic cultural traditions of the mill communities; and the historic character of the mill villages and hilltop villages.*

### THE VALLEY'S RESOURCES

Historians teach that the significance of some regions is defined by their natural resources (the coal-mining regions of Pennsylvania, for example), others by their cultural and historic resources (the old seaports of New England are another). The Blackstone Valley, by contrast, had been defined by all three. Its unique natural resource was the River and its watershed. Its unique cultural resource was a multi-ethnic tradition of investor-owned town life dedicated to textile production. And its unique historical resource was the physical form of the mill villages, which line the river banks with their complex of mills and worker houses. These stand in marked contrast to the rural hill towns surrounding the Valley where farmers once produced the goods to feed the mill workers below.

The Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan (Management Plan) frames the significance of the Valley's historical resources in this way: "The Blackstone River Valley is one of the nation's richest and best preserved repositories of landscapes, structures and sites that recall a neglected era of the American past: the Age of Industry." As the need for labor expanded through the 19th century, immigrants from many areas of Europe settled in the formerly Yankee towns. Many brought traditional folkways with them, further enriching and

deepening the cultural resources of the Valley. The natural resources of the region provided both the setting and the raw materials which sustained the Valley's economic and cultural development through its industrial era. In this inter-woven tapestry of natural and man-made forces, the Blackstone River remains the starting point. Its seemingly endless power to turn the water wheels of industry, quench the thirst of thousands who came to the Valley for work, and supply the myriad needs of textile production is central to understanding why this Valley made its mark on American history.

**Historical Resources** — The Management Plan characterizes the Blackstone Valley as a "unified working landscape of scenic mill villages, commercial town centers, rural open space and urban areas." Small mill communities clustered along the riverways, such as Slatersville in North Smithfield, are still illustrative of the Rhode Island System where whole villages were financed by a small group of investors. Housing, schools, libraries and churches all were built around the workplace that attracted families for employment in the mill. Slater Mill, the earliest site of textile manufacturing in the Valley, is well preserved, although the original mill village has evolved into the City of Pawtucket. Examples of early industrial villages which populate the Valley, can be readily contrasted with later 19th century industrial communities, such as Ashton, which are characterized by massive mill structures whose size responded to the growing scale of late 19th century production. With the rapid growth of industry and changing technology, transportation systems united and transformed the Valley. Colonial roads and early turnpikes, such as the still extant Central Turnpike in Northbridge and Sutton, were overlaid by railroads and highway systems spanning more than two centuries. Intact sections of the Blackstone Canal and Towpath lace through state park land in both states. By mid-century, the Providence and Worcester Railroad had eclipsed the Blackstone Canal as the principal means of commercial transportation in the Valley.

# Background

**Cultural Resources** — In the Rhode Island System of Manufacturing, classes and cultures were separated in the development of neighborhoods such as Worcester's Green Island and Quinsigamond Village neighborhoods. Traditions and cultural identity were reinforced by establishment of churches, social halls and restaurants. French Canadians, Germans, Swedes, English, Irish, Dutch and many more groups came to the Blackstone Valley, leaving some part of their cultural mark on the landscape or folkway traditions. One of the more compelling interpretations of this story is contained in the exhibits featured in the new Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, RI.

**Natural Resources** — Despite generations of development and change, the Blackstone River Valley hosts a rich array of natural resources which are evident in its rivers and tributaries, wetlands and rocky outcroppings, and forests and fields. The Blackstone River is the most significant natural resource in the region, linking two states and 24 communities by a natural system with a national story. Called "the hardest working river in America" at its zenith, the Blackstone was once harnessed by more than 40 dams over its 46-mile length. Over time, these impoundments created marsh and wetlands that are now an integral part of the region's natural ecosystem. State parks and forests also protect significant areas of both historic and natural resources. A developing system of trails and the Blackstone Bikeway will provide important connections to natural areas in the future.

The future of the Valley's natural resources has been determined important enough by Congress that the 1996 reauthorization act has required the Commission to complete a Natural Resources Inventory and Assessment as a stand-alone technical report. The Inventory, whose Executive Summary is appended to this document, will help direct the Commission's environmental agenda for the next ten years. Indeed, the well-being of the



*The Natural Resources Inventory and Assessment, mandated by Congress as part of the Commission's 1996 reauthorization, will direct the environmental agenda of the Commission for the next ten years; its Executive Summary is appended to this report.*

Blackstone and its river basin lands have been judged so important that the process of River Recovery has been selected as one of the four Core Commitments on the Commission's working agenda for the decade ahead.

## **THE COMMISSION AND THE HERITAGE CORRIDOR "EXPERIMENT"**

When Congress established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in 1986, it established a bi-state, federally-appointed commission of local and state representatives to help preserve and interpret the unique resources and qualities that made the Blackstone Valley significant both to the nation and to its residents. When the Commission was established in 1986, it was part of a then novel idea to enlist the National Park Service in a partnership dedicated to helping states and localities conserve their special regions - those places where historical and natural characteristics had left their mark on American history. At the time, this was an ambitious experiment; no one knew whether it would work or not.

*Called the "hardest working river in America" because of the countless mills which lined its banks and tributaries, the Blackstone was controlled by over 40 dams, whose man-made impoundments created ponds and wetlands now considered part of the Valley's natural ecosystem.*



# Background

## CONGRESSIONAL DIRECTION FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS

With reauthorization, Congress gave a clear message to the Commission - stay the course! It basically said the Commission should not alter significantly the Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan approved in 1990. The legislation did mandate the Commission to develop a "revised" plan within one year of enactment of P.L. 104-333. This revision or supplement to the Management Plan shall:

- "address the boundary change"
- include a Natural Resource Inventory
- develop a 10-year development plan outlining "resource protection needs and projects critical to maintaining or interpreting the distinctive character of the Corridor"; as well as a work program that reflects the authorized \$5 million and the partnerships necessary to carry out the plan.

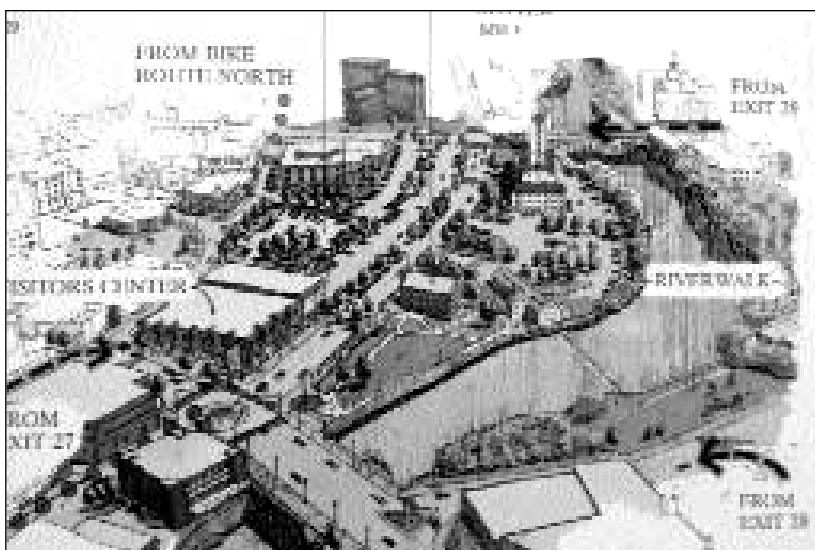
This document, The Next Ten Years, is meant as a companion piece to the Management Plan: it reaffirms the commitments of the last 10 years and describes an emerging Commission focus and strategy for the next ten years, calling attention to important work which remains undone. The Next Ten Years is a dynamic plan which provides the guidance of basic principles while recognizing the need to grow over the coming years in order to address changed circumstances. Not every idea or proposal which appears in this supplement may be accomplished, and some proposals undoubtedly will change in light of further examination, additional information, and new ideas.

## CULTURAL HERITAGE & LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN OBJECTIVES

Approved by the Secretary of the Interior in 1990, The Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan has served as the Commission's blueprint for action. Several overriding goals from that document continue to direct the Commission's work then as now:

- **PROTECT** the Valley's historic, cultural and natural resources in an integrated manner;
- **EDUCATE** and **INTERPRET** the Corridor's importance to the people of the Valley and its visitors;
- **FOSTER** specific activities that tap the Valley's unique resources and invite people to enjoy and celebrate them;
- **STIMULATE** the research necessary to understand the Valley's role in the American Industrial Revolution and the lessons it holds for our times; and;
- **COORDINATE** and **ENCOURAGE** all the partnerships that will be necessary to achieve these goals.

It should be noted that the Management Plan, which was appended by a series of five reports, including a Historic Resources Inventory, Design Guidelines and Standards, an Interpretive Plan, a Land Use Management Plan and an Economic Assessment, is now recognized as an early national model for the "heritage area" experiment.



*The working agenda of the Commission remains comprehensive for the next ten years: continue to reinvest in the Valley's historic, cultural and natural resources; tell the industrial history story to a national audience; build local constituencies through heritage partnerships; carry out demonstration projects that encourage those partners; and continue coordination between state and federal agencies which share aspects of its mission.*

# The Next Ten Years

ment in “greenfield” areas of the Valley will increase. By contrast, public workshops held this year and in the recent past by the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce indicate that local residents wish deeply to conserve the open space qualities of their region, particularly along the major roadways. The growth effects associated with regional highways and emerging employment centers, such as in Smithfield, RI, threaten to accentuate a highly visible process of suburban sprawl which is displacing cultural and natural landscapes that are key to the Blackstone Valley’s public appeal.

**Riverways.** The future of the Blackstone River, with its tributaries and watershed lands, is challenged by effects of historic and modern growth patterns. The impacts of two centuries of manufacturing, together with inappropriate land uses and development characteristics harmful to riverways have resulted in poor water quality. The fluctuating river levels related to hydropower generation demands have adversely impacted wildlife habitat and promoted riverbank erosion. Other related issues include the increasing probability of structural problems with aging mill dams, the principal danger of which is both flooding and the unleashing of built-up, toxic bottom sediments down-

stream. These toxins could, in turn, threaten much of Narragansett Bay’s fishing industry. More than two decades of federal mandates for clean water and pollution control demonstrate that continued progress is possible: indicators of some forms of pollution show declines of roughly two-thirds. The Commission should expect to continue advocating for clean-up in a coordinated and collaborative manner with the appropriate public agencies which shoulder regional responsibility for this task.

## THE CORE COMMITMENTS

In order to maintain an essential balance between existing commitments and new partnerships likely to be forged throughout the new communities, the Commission has identified four basic objectives, outlined below, which are the source of its core programmatic goals for the next ten years:

### 1. TELL THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION BY...

...completing the task of telling the Valley’s full heritage story through a richly detailed system of sites and other interpretive venues which dramatically convey the contributing role of each Valley community in the birth and development story of the American textile industry.

...headlining the Valley’s nationally significant story through the development of a core visitor experience which tells the story of the Birth of the American Industrial Revolution in New England - the epic tale of birth, growth, maturation, and transition which characterize all aspects of the textile story. It tells of the technological innovations in manufacturing and transportation, to social transitions from farm to factory, and from the flowering and decline of the industry to the physical and social legacy available for future generations.



*Four core commitments - Telling the Story of the American Industrial Revolution; Preserving and Enhancing the Valley’s Communities; Balancing Conservation and Growth; and Promoting the Recovery of the River - will shape the Commission’s working agenda over the next ten years.*



*The first Core Commitment focuses on the national significance of the Blackstone’s formative role in the early American Industrial Revolution.*



*The Blackstone River, with its tributaries and watershed lands, is challenged both by effects of past industrial uses and modern growth patterns.*





*The second Core  
Commitment focuses on the  
continued need to preserve  
and revitalize the Valley's  
towns and village centers.*

...and by shaping a Core Visitor Experience throughout the Story Chapters by employing automobile, train, bicycle, and river “pathways” to special places within the Corridor representing chapters of the heritage story, linked by a signage system which allows transitions from car to bicycle to river craft as part of the heritage travel experience.

## **2. PRESERVE AND ENHANCE VALLEY COMMUNITIES BY...**

...preserving and restoring key interpretive resources: Work with potential partners through planning, incentives and education to strengthen preservation-oriented revitalization programs in key communities which would preserve areas of key significance that tell the story.

...enhancing economic opportunity and the quality of life: Launch programs to make town and village centers more competitive for preservation-related investment.

...and demonstrating the linkage between preservation and enhanced communities: Demonstrate where historic preservation and conservation of natural resources can create enhanced value and community amenities which attract and retain residents and businesses.

## **3. BALANCE CONSERVATION AND GROWTH BY...**

...expanding the Commission's commitment to preserving valuable cultural and natural landscapes: The Natural Resources Inventory, appended to this plan, identifies many of the key

*A third Core Commitment  
underscores the delicate but  
necessary balance needed  
between stimulating eco-  
nomic growth and conserv-  
ing the natural and historic  
places of the Valley.*



resources and recommends a prioritized strategy for their conservation.

...maintaining distinct and appropriate edges to historic places: Appropriate zoning and local decision-making, based upon comprehensive planning and resource assessment, is critical to containing inappropriate sprawl and focusing growth in already developed areas where public infrastructure exists.

...and providing education and case studies to equip local decision makers: Problem solving forums and progressive land use techniques can help stakeholders manage and direct growth for a healthier region.

## **4. PROMOTE RIVER RECOVERY BY...**

...reinforcing the Commission's commitment to improving the health of the River system: Existing local, state and federal environmental programs should be augmented by more regional cooperation and the application of new technologies and insights to create appropriate management practices for the River and its watershed. The lands and waters of the Blackstone Valley must be understood as an intricately linked natural system.

...increasing public awareness: Education remains the foundation for building public support for the conservation of natural resources connected to the River watershed.

...and facilitating public use and enjoyment: Opening the entire length of the Blackstone River to more public recreational use and appreciation is central to the goal of the Blackstone Bikeway project, which is developing a “greenway” path with multiple points of public access between Worcester and Providence.